

ANTOINE CATALA:
Everything is Okay
by Vijay Masharani

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Antoine Catala, I am here for you (t-shirt), 2017. Silicone rubber, resin coated foam, pneumatics. 10 × 34 × 31 inches. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

It would be difficult to come up with a more oblivious statement than “everything is okay.” We can read it as either a provocation—an offensively false assertion—or an expression of denial. Antoine Catala’s *Everything is Okay* should be understood to exemplify what Lauren Berlant calls a “cruel optimism,” defined as “a condition of maintaining an attachment to a... problematic object,” that “provides ... the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.”¹ This process of self-delusion is communal; it requires a complex system of affective regulation. Networked communications technologies play a critical role in the maintenance of this system; social media is a regulator of our fears, hopes, and anxieties. The task of Antoine Catala’s exhibition is to give form to this system of affective regulation.

In *Flat Sitcom* (2017), we see two vertically mounted monitors—a familiar formal decision for those previously acquainted with Catala’s work; the vertical orientation alludes to a smartphone, inviting yet refusing an active viewing experience. Two looping videos of clothed figures in upper middle class domestic settings—seated in a bathroom, leaning against a kitchen countertop—are placed in opposition. The people on the two monitors are almost static, but their appearance is glitched out—their eyelids, eyebrows, upper lips, hairlines, and various aspects of their clothing bulge, recede, and protrude over time. They text each other about a potentially threatening situation—someone heard a noise in the house—that alludes to crises in general. A dreamy synth-pop instrumental by Catala’s friend, Olivier Alary, fills the room. The subtle distortion of the bodies renders them paralyzed. The sense of entrapment is unmistakable; we are presented here with a model of regimented movement and expression in the form of digital stasis; the figures’ inability to move is paralleled by the texts’ inability to be wrong. Typos connote emotion; autocorrect snaps them back to a banal neutrality.

Throughout the gallery space are distributed small silicone objects—a t-shirt, a tote bag, a blouse, a sock—all titled *I am here for you*. Each object has a neutral-faced emoji bulging out of it. On the walls hang stretched latex canvases over extruded letterforms and shapes. One is a 3-D Band-Aid, the others read “everything is okay” and “don’t worry.” Both the emoji-casts and the canvases are rigged to a pump system; the pieces periodically inflate and deflate. The emojis have dents that are buffed out and then re-inflicted, while the legibility of the canvas’ messages is contingent on their suffocation. We’re presented here again with modes of regulation. Emojis function, as characterized by Hito Steyerl, as tokens of affective currency. Just as, according to credit theories of money, paper currency represents a unit of debt, emojis embody a debt of empathy. But as Steyerl goes on to note, following Brian Kuan Wood, an affective economy is an exhausted economy.² We are emotionally bankrupt. This is where Catala’s language of injury plays in; these pieces are on life support—they’re dying.

The mechanism by which the canvases and floor sculptures are able to “breathe” has a centralized control mechanism; the entire show can be run by one computer via Wi-Fi. This detail points to how the system of affective regulation that we’ve developed is irreconcilably centralized. In its most exaggerated form, this system takes the form of privatized, automated mental services such as the NHS-supported artificially intelligent psychiatric diagnostician *Babylon* or Google’s development of a PHQ-9 survey that appears whenever someone searches for the term “depression” from their phone. These programs are the hubristic Band-Aid ever-present in Catala’s work. They displace a holistic understanding of mental health and relegate the task of treating our collective melancholia to the same technocratic structures that produced and exploited our anxieties in the first place (Sean Parker’s recent testimony regarding the underlying ethos of Facebook is relevant here). Antoine Catala’s *Everything is Okay* is a visualization of this hypocrisy; it points to a nefarious correspondence between a legible system of affective regulation and a centralization apparatus that seeks to unabashedly profit from our continued alienation.